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## THE GOVERNMENT OF CHARLEMAGNE AS INFLUENCED BY AUGUSTINE'S *CITY OF GOD*

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In Einhard's *Vita Caroli*, chapter xxiv, there is the following statement in regard to Charlemagne's dinner entertainments: "Inter cenandum aut aliquod acroama aut lectorem audiebat. Legebantur ei historiae et antiquorum res gestae. Delectabatur et libris sancti Augustini, praecipueque his qui *De Civitate Dei* praetitulati sunt." In the latest English edition of the *Vita Caroli* (Oxford: Garrod and Mowat, 1915) there is this note on the passage: "There is no reason to doubt that this book colored Charlemagne's whole conception of the empire, and that it was one of the deepest influences in his politico-religious thinking." James Bryce in his *Holy Roman Empire* in a footnote (p. 94) says, "Augustine's influence, great through all the Middle Ages, was greater on no one than on Charles [*delectabatur*, etc., Einhard, chap. xxiv]. One can imagine the impression which such a chapter as that on the true happiness of a Christian emperor [v. 24] would make upon a pious and susceptible mind. It is hardly too much to say that the Holy Roman Empire was built upon the foundation of the *De Civitate Dei*." In the life of Charlemagne by H. W. C. Davis a reference to this subject is elaborated as follows (p. 218):

He loved no book more than St. Augustine's *City of God*. Therein he read that conquests in themselves are evil and only to be justified if the condition of the conquered is improved; that the Roman Empire was more to be honored in her small beginnings, when her sons were few and virtuous, than later, when only her vast bulk and riches saved her from the fatal consequences of selfishness and luxury. There too he found and pondered on the description of the perfect Emperor who holds his power as something which God has given and will, in His good time, take away; who, not elated by flattery or the pride of pre-eminence, remembers that he is a mortal and looks forward to that other Empire in which he will find many equals; who uses all his power to the advancement of God's glory and worship; who thinks it a greater thing to

rule his own desires than to be master of many peoples. And from Alcuin, a man steeped like himself in Saint Augustine's teaching, he received more detailed exhortations of the same kind; that Empire is a responsibility; that while a king is charged with the care of one nation, an Emperor is the maker and maintainer of that social order wherein kingdoms are but as passing accidents. "Through your prosperity," wrote Alcuin, "Christendom is preserved, the Catholic faith defended, the law of justice made known to all men." Repeatedly the old scholar warned him, bearing this in mind, to turn away from distant wars, and to think rather of regenerating the Christian church and of making justice supreme within the lands already conquered.

Furthermore, Hodgkin in his *Charlemagne* (p. 140), says, "Throughout his kingly and imperial career Charles took the religious part of his duties seriously. It was not for nothing that he bore the title of Christianissimus Rex, not for nothing that Saint Augustine's famous treatise the *Civitas Dei* was the favorite companion of his leisure."

These statements regarding the influence of Augustine on Charlemagne are certainly positive enough and might lead one to infer that the matter was not a debatable one at all. It is to be noted, however, at the outset that they are inferences drawn from only one brief statement of the chief biographer of Charlemagne. If they are justified by all the facts, we should be gratified by the evidence of the influence of a great book on a great man; but if not we can only conclude that history is sometimes written more from inference than from fact.

We may admit without argument that Augustine was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of the church fathers, that his writings were studied extensively by churchmen throughout the Middle Ages, and that some of his books are read with interest, possibly with profit, today, and, furthermore, that his authority on matters of doctrine and interpretation has been very great in the theological structure of the Roman Catholic church. But are we justified in concluding that one of his works greatly influenced the government of Charlemagne because that monarch was pleased with the readings from the book at his dinner entertainments? Convincing evidence one way or the other can hardly be expected now since the great Charles cannot answer for himself. But the book of Augustine is extant and the career of Charles is a matter of record.

Consequently we should be able to arrive at some fairly justifiable conclusions from a comparison of the two.

First then let us review briefly the *City of God* and the work of Augustine in general. The great bishop of Hippo during the course of his long and eventful life produced an astonishing amount of literary work, more than one hundred books being ascribed to him. He lived from 354 to 430 and died at his episcopal city while it was under siege by the Vandals. The capture of Rome by Alaric in 410 had not only distressed but greatly perplexed the civilized world. Augustine tries to reassure the faithful by the idea that the earthly city which had been the synonym for what was strong and enduring was to be superseded by the eternal city whose reign was in the hearts of men. The work is an early attempt at a philosophy of history, under the aspect of two rival cities or communities—the eternal city of God and the perishing city of the world. In Book i the author censures the pagans who attributed the calamities of the world, and especially the sack of Rome by the Goths, to the Christian religion and its prohibition of the worship of the gods. In Book ii the tumultuous history of Rome is reviewed and the failure of her numerous gods to help her in times of trouble. Augustine even goes out of his way to assail the careers of Romulus and other kings and consuls because of their murderous wars. In spite of Aesculapius there were many plagues, and in spite of protecting deities for every activity of life there were defeats and disasters many times. The subject is continued in a similar vein in Book iii, where he adds that if all these evils had happened after the coming of Christ the people would have blamed Christianity for them. In Book iv he concludes that the long duration of the Roman Empire was due not to any pagan gods, who were often notoriously immoral, but to the will of the true God, by whose power and judgment earthly kingdoms are founded and maintained. In this book occur some noteworthy passages, especially interesting if we are to suppose that Charlemagne ever read them, e.g., chapter vi (*sub fin.*) “*Inferre autem bella finitimis et in cetera inde procedere ac populos sibi non molestos sola regni cupiditate conterere et subdere, quid aliud quam grande latrocinium nominandum est?*” In Book v the question of fate is dealt with only to show that the

greatness of Rome was not due to fate. He refers to the virtues of the early Romans as explaining to some degree their success. We may here remark that these "natural virtues," as he calls them, of the early Romans were previously ascribed to the inspiration of demons. He also has an unhappy criticism of some of the finest models of old Rome, inasmuch as it is his aim to make all virtue theistic. He then explains what should be accounted the true happiness of the Christian emperors. It is this passage which Bryce refers to (also Davis) as probably influencing Charlemagne. Accordingly I will quote it here (*De Civitate Dei* v. 24; translation of Professor Dods):

For neither do we say that certain Christian emperors were happy because they ruled a long time, or, dying a peaceful death, left their sons to succeed them in the empire, or subdued the enemies of the republic, or were able both to guard against and to suppress the attempt of hostile citizens rising against them. These and other gifts or comforts of this sorrowful life even certain worshippers of demons have merited to receive, who do not belong to the Kingdom of God to which these belong; and this is to be traced to the mercy of God who would not have those who believe in Him desire such things as the highest good. But we say that they are happy if they rule justly; if they are not lifted up amid the praises of those who pay them sublime honors, and the obsequiousness of those who salute them with excessive humility, but remember that they are men; if they make their power the handmaid of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship; if they fear, love, worship God; if more than their own they love that kingdom in which they are not afraid to have partners; if they are slow to punish, ready to pardon; if they apply that punishment as necessary to government and defence of the republic, and not in order to gratify their own enmity, but with the hope that the transgressor may amend his ways; if they compensate with the lenity of mercy and the liberality of benevolence for whatever severity they may be compelled to decree; if their luxury is as much restrained as it might have been unrestrained; if they prefer to govern depraved desires rather than any nation whatever; and if they do all these things, not through ardent desire of empty glory, but through love of eternal felicity, not neglecting to offer to the true God, who is their God, for their sins, the sacrifices of humility, contrition, and prayer. Such Christian emperors, we say, are happy in the present time by hope, and are destined to be so in the enjoyment of the reality itself, when that which we wait for shall have arrived.

Books vi-x are directed against those who believe that the gods are to be worshiped for the sake of eternal life. He attacks

the monotheistic ideas of Varro and Plato, showing how these teachers were unable to spread truth and virtue among the masses, and so he introduces in a very earnest and beautiful passage the necessity of the Incarnation (vii. 31; x. 29). In some of these books there are some rather racy criticisms of heathen divinities, particularly those connected with marriage—passages which may have interested Charlemagne and his rather loose-mannered court even if they did not edify them. The second half of the work is constructive and theological. Six books (xi–xvi) are devoted to one of his innumerable efforts to get at the light which he was convinced was hidden in the Book of Genesis. With painful ingenuity he labors to elucidate or explain away the difficulties of the old story. In xiv. 13 occurs one of his characterizations of the *City of God*:

And therefore it is that *humility* is specially recommended to the City of God as it sojourns in this world, and is especially exhibited in the City of God and the person of Christ its king; while the contrary vice of pride, according to the testimony of the sacred writings, specially rules his adversary the devil. And certainly this is the great difference which distinguishes the two cities of which we speak, the one being the society of godly men, the other of the ungodly, each associated with the angels that adhere to their party, and the one guided and fashioned by love of self, the other by love of God.

Again in xiv. 28:

Accordingly the two cities have been formed by the two loves; the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men, but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of the conscience.

Some of the metaphorical explanations of the ark, tower of Babel, etc., are ridiculously far-fetched, while the absolute condemnation of all scientific theories which seem to contradict the Bible are perhaps an earnest of the blind bigotry of the Middle Ages. The history of the City of God is traced in Books xvi–xviii from the time of the kings to that of Christ, the author dealing extensively with prophecies sacred and profane in regard to the coming of the Messiah. Then follow the discussions of heathen philosophers and their ideas of the Supreme Good. In the remaining books such subjects as the last judgment, eternal punishment,

portents, miracles, the eternal happiness of the saints, faith in the resurrection and the activities of the saints in bliss are elaborated with more or less interesting detail, and the work closes with an almost ecstatic vision of the eternal felicity of the city of God and the perpetual Sabbath.

It seems rather generally agreed that the effect produced by this great work in its own time could not have been very great. But undoubtedly it became immensely popular in later times. This is partly due, no doubt, to the great variety of ideas, opinions, and facts that are brought before the reader's mind. But, as Professor Dods says, "the interest attaching to the *City of God* is not merely historical. It is the earnestness and ability with which he develops his own philosophical and theological views which gradually fascinate the reader and make him see why the world has set this among the few greatest books of all time." It became one of the chief sources of study and authority in the church, so that by the time of Charlemagne the theology of the ruling faith of the empire was largely interpreted as Augustine had enunciated it. But the question with us here is what influence could the work have had on the government, foreign policy, or private life of the greatest of mediæval monarchs. Charlemagne ruled from 768 to 814 A.D., a period nearly four hundred years after the publication of the *City of God*. The world had become Catholic and the church and its head had largely replaced in power and name the Roman Empire and the Caesar. Since the fall of the Western Empire no single ruler had united under his own sway all the scattered parts of what was Roman, but yet the permanency of the empire and the rule of an emperor remained as fixed notions in men's minds. It may be that when Charlemagne allowed himself in 800 to be crowned emperor and Augustus he had some rather indefinite notion of a new era inaugurated under himself when a City of God or an empire of the true faith should replace the old and discredited earthly empire. Bryce even suggests (p. 48) that the pope had some such notion when he crowned the emperor. "In Charles, the hero who united under one scepter so many races and whose religious spirit made him appear to rule all as the vicegerent of God, the pontiff might well see, as later ages saw, the new golden head of a second image,

erected on the ruins of that whose mingled iron and clay seemed crumbling to nothingness behind the impregnable bulwarks of Constantinople." But whatever conception Charles or the pope or any other of their time may have had of the new era, no thinking man even then could fail to see how different the order of things was from that of old Rome on the one hand and of the ideal state of Augustine on the other. It is probable that only in the later years of his life did Charlemagne conceive any ideal of a Christian state, if indeed he ever had such an ideal or ever consciously followed the precepts of Augustine. And the great work of his career, his conquests and organization of conquered peoples, belongs to his earlier years. We know that on the death of his father Pippin, Charles and his brother Carloman became joint heirs of the kingdom. There was trouble almost from the first, till the opportune death of Carloman in 771 left Charles sole monarch with no regard for the rights of Carloman's children. In his numerous wars of conquest he was perhaps rather more merciful and broad-minded than most of his predecessors. But there were instances of great cruelty and injustice, for it seemed to be his idea that resistance to his authority and persistence in paganism were things to be thoroughly stamped out. When he swept with his ravaging armies over the greater part of Germany he compelled the conquered kings and their peoples to accept Christian baptism as a sign and symbol of their submission. Sometimes very serious rebellions broke out, for, strange to say, these Saxons seemed to have an inextinguishable hatred of slavery and Christianity. It took eighteen expeditions and thirty-three years to conquer them. On the first campaign in 782 as many as 4,500 captives were put to death in cold blood on one day. In this year Widukind, the Saxon king, was at last conquered and was baptized, Charles acting as his godfather. In 785 a revolt was suppressed in the north, and on this occasion, as Einhard tells us, some of the captives were put to death, some deprived of sight, some exiled. In 804 he had recourse to the last injustice of conquerors, the transportation of the Saxons who dwelt beyond the Elbe to Frankland and the giving of their lands to pagans. In his zeal for the Christian faith he could tolerate no heathen within his realm, and so compelled subject kings and peoples to be baptized.



Such wholesale additions to the body of true believers, greater than at any Pentecost, could hardly add much spiritual strength to the church. Several of his adversaries, such as Desiderius of Lombardy, Tassilo of Bavaria, even several of his own relatives, including his son Pippin, disappeared permanently in monasteries, a convenient place for dangerous rivals and suitable for their own spiritual development. As a statesman Charles ranked high. He had the doubtful credit of introducing or at least of fostering feudalism, but beyond question he was a wise and firm administrator. In many of his enactments, particularly in his capitularies, the religious motive was clearly foremost. Even his great service to learning was fundamentally due to his desire to advance the true understanding of the Scriptures "*ut facilius et rectius divinarum scripturarum mysteria valeatis penetrare.*" He was indeed broad-minded enough to see some merit in secular writings and made an effort to save some of the early literature of his race.

Of his private life we may say that in simplicity and useful activity there was much to admire. But judged by modern or even mediaeval standards there was much also to condemn. His first marriage, in 770, with the daughter of King Desiderius of Lombardy was soon dissolved, an action which probably led to enmity between the two kings. He contracted four other marriages and appeared to have loved all of his wives. But he also contracted several other "marriages of the second rank," as they are euphemistically called by his clerical admirers (Davis, p. 243). His court was not pure and his daughters turned out badly. He was known as a generous almsgiver and bestowed his benefactions on the needy at home and abroad, but chiefly on the church and the clergy.

Now in all the career of this great sovereign what act or policy is there which we can with assurance say was influenced by his study of theological literature? He was beyond doubt a zealous supporter of the church and a man of personal piety even if his actions were often those of a barbarian or libertine. But his religious proclivities were surely as much due to his inherited Catholicism and his naturally emotional nature as to any study of a book. In fact there is nothing in Augustine's work, dealing with counsel to a

ruler, certainly not in the chapter quoted by Bryce and others, which would not be found in the pages of Scripture itself. And furthermore there is nothing in all his administration of government at home or in the provinces which could be even remotely traced to the theocratic ideas of Augustine. We know, moreover, from Einhard's account and from other sources that as emperor and Augustus he had before his mind the career of Augustus Caesar, and if he followed any model it was more than likely the work of the first Roman emperor as described by Suetonius. The probabilities are that only a few portions of Augustine's work were ever read to Charles, and these would be such as might conduce to pious reflection or the entertainment of the hour, but not to the shaping of great policies of government.

Finally we may question the influence of any book, outside the Scriptures, on any great national policies. The personal life and the theological views of some great men have been influenced, according to their own confession, by the reading of great works, notably by those of Augustine himself, and to some extent, we may assume, their views have been carried into legislation. But statesmanship is rather the result of a long series of events and traditions and is seldom if ever founded on any model prescribed by philosopher or theologian. Augustine himself says that he was profoundly influenced by Cicero's work *Hortensius*. And in modern times, to take only one example, Gladstone says he owed much to Augustine. His words are, "I have been feeling my way; owing little to living teachers, but enormously to four dead ones (over and above the four gospels), i.e., Aristotle, Augustine, Dante, Butler—my four doctors are doctors to the speculative man; would they were such to the practical too!" (Morley's *Life*, I, 207). Gladstone probably read Augustine more intelligently than Charlemagne ever could, but no one would credit him with shaping his policies on any such authority.

In conclusion we may say that a more fitting comment on Einhard's statement in the *Vita Caroli* would be, "Charlemagne may have enjoyed the book of Augustine, but there is nothing in his life or government to indicate that he was much edified thereby."